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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 000721

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL MOPS TU GR

SUBJECT: CANCELLED NATO EXERCISE STIRS POLITICAL ROW

REF: ATHENS 678

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The Government and opposition sparred over NATO's withdrawal of support to Noble Archer (ref), which the opposition claimed had led to the "indirect questioning" of Greek sovereignty over the island of Aghios Efstratios. In Parliament, Minister of Defense Meimarakis dismissed opposition charges and stuck to the public line that the "Noble Archer" exercise had simply been postponed because aircraft were unavailable; he also reportedly hinted at MFA culpability for the failed exercise. Main opposition party PASOK blasted the government for not having obtained NATO guarantees for the exercise to go forward. PASOK has further attacked the government over a "lack of policy" vis-a-vis Turkey and for tolerating Turkish "provocations" in the Aegean and elsewhere. End Summary.

Minister of Defense in Parliament

¶2. (U) NATO's withdrawal of support for "Noble Archer" became the central issue of a May 21 briefing of the parliamentary committee on Defense and Foreign Affairs by Defense Minister Meimarakis. Meimarakis said Greece had been surprised by the decision as the Ministry of Defense had previously received "pledges" from the Alliance that the exercise would proceed. He told the committee he did not know what exactly led to the NATO decision but added that the events will be "investigated." Senior PASOK member, and party defense spokesperson, Vasso Papandreou retorted that the GoG had "completely botched" the affair and suggested that "the information conduit that should have kept (the GoG) informed is broken." Her initial reaction, captured yesterday on prime-time TV, was that the government's "excuse" was "sad and dangerous."

¶3. (SBU) Several media commentaries have suggested that Meimarakis' claim was a lightly veiled suggestion that the MFA should be held accountable for the failed exercise, as the MOD had received assurances from NATO military authorities that the exercise would go forward. There are also varying media reports that MFA officials then responded on background that the MOD did not adequately coordinate with the MFA on the exercise, but rather "rushed" to carry out the exercise without understanding "the whole picture." Some have described the MFA as at odds with Meimarakis and "dissatisfied" over the MoD handling of the affair. Meimarakis himself has affirmed to reporters that the MoD cooperates well with the MFA and that there is "no issue" in the relations between the two ministries. Some well-placed journalists also tell us that FM

Bakoyiannis has tried, privately and through her spokesman, to do the same.

Opposition Criticism

¶4. (U) Outside parliament, PASOK continued to attack the Karamanlis administration, with the party diplomatic spokesperson Andreas Loverdos accusing the GoG of "being lax" vis-a-vis Turkish demands in the Aegean that had now led to indirect questioning about Greek sovereignty over the island Aghios Efstratios. In fact, Loverdos said, "many things in Turkey are changing," and, thus, Greece's posture in Greek-Turkish relations "should be changing" as well. The GoG, Loverdos added, has no policy on Turkey and as a result it had "to swallow Aghios Stratis" and suffer through "constant Turkish provocations" without an effective response.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: It is not surprising that the opposition has added the cancelled NATO exercise to its list of criticisms of the government. What we have been surprised by is the debate itself -- the debate has largely steered clear of the U.S. role in the NATO decision to withdraw support for the exercise. Our prompt public statement reaffirming the "Hellenicity" of the island seems to have helped limit the typically anti-American commentary. Meanwhile, the government has affirmed its ongoing intent to improve relations with Turkey in the face of real concern about the political situation there, making clear that this current dut-up will not impede the pending visit to Turkey by CHOD General Grapsas.

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